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Economic and Social Council

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Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fifth session
22 February-4 March 2011
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Association of Presbyterian Women of Aoteaora (New Zealand), Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, Global Action on Aging, Lutheran World Federation, Presbyterian Church USA, Salvation Army, Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, United Methodist Church General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church General Board of Global Ministries, World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women, World Student Christian Federation and World Young Women's Christian Association, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

1. Ecumenical Women, a coalition of Christian organizations and denominations and other non-governmental organizations, welcome the sixteenth-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action at the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations.

2. We uphold women and girls as relational beings created as equal partners of our male counterparts in the image of God, and thus oppose all forms of gender-based violence, discrimination and oppression.

3. We affirm the promotion of gender equality and justice from a human rights perspective. We maintain that the contributions and empowerment of women and girls of all ages are fundamental, enshrined in the Platform and international laws, and necessary to meet all the Millennium Development Goals.

4. Despite 16 years of national policies and international agreement to advance women's rights, the goals of the Platform and the Goals remain unfulfilled because of unacknowledged systems of power. At the root of all challenges facing women and girls in our work today is the underlying paradigm of patriarchy, or the belief that men are superior to and more valuable than women.

5. The Platform will remain unfulfilled unless it is recognized that existing institutional structures are inherently gender-biased and need to be critically examined and radically transformed.

6. Implementations have failed to recognize the full diversity of women's situations and the multiplicity of challenges they face.

7. The review process must take complexities, differences and intervention strategies into account. As Ecumenical Women, we commit ourselves as partners in the process.

8. Talks, resolutions and implementations have failed to address language bias used as a tool to disempower women: for example, calling assaults or attacks against women in their homes "domestic violence" and not "criminal acts".

9. Ecumenical Women works to bring about a paradigm shift; deconstructing patriarchy and building a paradigm of mutual partnership. Without a shift at such a basic level, any work towards improving life for women and girls will only scratch the surface.

Education and decent work

10. Education is an essential human right. It is a global portal to address cultural practices of gender-based violence. Education increases girls' and women's participation in society impacts the welfare of their families and communities, and advances the progress of the Goals in areas such as reducing maternal and child mortality. Access to secondary education increases women's rights awareness, autonomy, empowerment, and can open the way for full employment and decent work.

* Issued without formal editing.

11. Decent work protects and promotes human dignity and is central to any effort to eradicate poverty and bring sustainable development at a global level. More women than men are either unemployed or working in an informal economy with no social protection or social security.

12. Paradigms of patriarchy reinforce ideas that women should not or cannot be educated, hold prestigious positions, create valuable new technologies, or be paid the same as men. These paradigms can also keep us from critical examination of seemingly positive results.

13. Although some regions can celebrate the increasing enrolment of girls and boys in primary education, a different story appears when a gender perspective intersects with race/ethnicity, national origin, geographic location and economic background. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) reports that while some countries reached gender parity in secondary attendance, poor girls and those in rural areas are neglected, especially in the poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

14. Enrolment in school does not always equal quality education. A quality education demands a relevant curriculum in a healthy and safe school environment to foster gender equality and a life free of violence and discrimination in order to strengthen girls' decision-making power, and to enable their comprehensive knowledge in literacy, numeracy and the arts. Quality education will aid in breaking down gender stereotypes that keep girls and women away from the fields of science and technology.

15. Even in countries in Latin America, where more women than men completed their secondary education, this advantage does not always translate to women having better opportunities to access jobs and decent work. The persistence of gender-economic injustice and occupational segregation due to the gender stereotyping and racial discrimination of dominant paradigms must be addressed.

Impact of the global economic crisis

16. The global economic crisis aggravates women's access to full employment and decent work, as women's work is largely undervalued and seen as non-essential.

17. An increase in number of women heads of household, and especially in these situations, full employment and decent work are keys to women overcoming poverty and being able to care for their families and communities.

18. The global economic crisis is placing education at risk and jeopardizing the limited progress made, especially in developing countries and for minority populations in developed countries.

Science and technology

19. In its agreed conclusions on funding gender and the empowerment of women, the Commission notes the growing body of evidence demonstrating that investing in women and girls has a multiplier effect. Increasing women's economic empowerment and access to science and technology is central to the achievement of the Goals and adequate resources need to be allocated at all levels, mechanisms and capacities need to be strengthened, and gender responsive policies need to be enhanced to fully utilize the multiplier effect.

20. Women must be able to define their own technological needs, and be empowered to fulfil them at all levels of science and technology research and development.

21. Through skills training and microcredit, we can see the impact of women having the means and opportunities to invest in simple technology such as a sewing machine, basic agricultural technology and more efficient cooking devices. In many cases, the first investment eventually allows women to employ and provide decent work for other women.

Access to information technology and its connection to decent work

22. The lack of women in science and technology jobs affects women's access to higher income jobs, the talent pool and their potential influence over the science research agenda, leading to the neglect of topics affecting their well-being.

23. Women's access to employment is constrained by patriarchal paradigms, including sole responsibility for caregiving, early marriage and childbearing, restrictions on women's physical mobility, lack of acceptance of women in workforce and employer bias.

24. Women who do succeed in careers in science, engineering and technology are marginalized by patriarchal paradigms that dictate whether women are able to or should do this type of work, foster hostile hypermasculine cultures, and perpetuate sexual harassment.

25. Ecumenical Women therefore urges:

(a) The United Nations:

- To challenge the dominant paradigm of patriarchy to one of mutual partnership:

(i) Conduct a study on the existing paradigm, including self-assessment of what the practice of having male Secretaries-General since the birth of the United Nations means in relation to its pursuit of gender justice;

(ii) Challenge gender stereotypes in order to encourage the involvement of young women in careers of science, engineering and technology, areas in which female participation was once considered near impossible;

(iii) Motivate men to partner in ending violence and discrimination against women through positive masculinity training, gender awareness and learning about human rights;

(iv) Address the causes of limited representation of women and girls in science and technology, such as socialization and cultural stereotyping of gender roles, and the gender, attitude and teaching approach of teachers and counsellors;

(v) Create special initiatives to integrate young women in a gender disaggregated workforce;

(vi) Ensure that mechanisms of social protection for decent work reach women in all communities, including women in rural or remote areas;

(b) Governments:

- To creatively advocate for a new paradigm:

(i) Intensify well-accessed and well-monitored collaboration with men's initiatives that work towards gender justice such as the White Ribbon Campaign, MenEngage, and Women Peacemakers Program Masculinities Project;

(ii) Make concrete moves to remove gender stereotyping in science textbooks;

(iii) Seek funding for research projects on various aspects of the problems of women's access to science and technology education;

(iv) Acknowledge and publish the contributions of women scientists and technologists through the awarding of national honours;

(v) Encourage bilateral mentoring partnerships between girls and women;

- To advance this paradigm shift in practical ways, it further urges Governments to:

(i) Formulate and enforce policies that will increase females' enrolment in science in secondary schools;

(ii) Provide scholarships to women and girls who demonstrate capability in science and technology education;

(iii) Provide adequate science laboratory facilities in schools;

(iv) Provide incentives to science and technology teachers to boost confidence and increase their level of commitment;

(v) Create policy for gender sensitization training and gender auditing of the existing curriculum, specifically in the areas of science and technology education;

(vi) Protect education budgets from the global economic crisis; otherwise generations of girls will be trapped in poverty and discrimination.

Review of agreed conclusion from the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women

26. In the agreed conclusion from the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the States Members of the United Nations affirmed that the empowerment of girls requires the active support and engagement of their parents, legal guardians, families, boys and men, and the wider community.

27. Again, Ecumenical Women advocates that a shift in our patriarchal paradigm must take place in order to achieve these goals.

Education and training is the key

28. Access to training enables girls to develop leadership capacities and ensures they can fully participate in their societies. Education and job skills programmes are needed for girls, with attention to how our current paradigms shape what we believe girls and women are capable of learning and doing.

Poverty

29. Girl children living in poverty need improvement in all aspects of their lives and living conditions, as they are often considered less important that their brothers when it comes to expenses such as medical care, education, and even food.

Violence against girls

30. All forms of violence against girls must be condemned, including physical, mental, psychological, and sexual violence, torture, homophobia, child abuse and exploitation, hostage-taking, domestic violence, trafficking in or sale of children or their organs, paedophilia, child prostitution, child pornography, child sex tourism, gang-related violence, and harmful practices in all settings.

31. Ecumenical Women therefore urges the United Nations to fully implement all international agreements, including the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action, Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009) and 1889 (2009) on women, peace and security, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

32. It also urges Governments to:

(a) Work for deep changes in society and our commonly held paradigms to end discrimination;

(b) Provide safe school environments for girls in their communities, improve education for girls and address the reasons girls fail to attend school or complete their education, such as bullying or cultural practices;

(c) Ensure resources and technical assistance to help develop girls' skills and education;

(d) Integrate gender perspective in developing programmes and policies;

(e) Raise awareness of all types of violence, and how violence harms girls and undermines gender equality;

(f) Encourage all people to actively participate in the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence;

(g) Ensure age-appropriate and gender-sensitive services to girls;

(h) Ensure education about girls' rights by all people at all levels;

(i) Develop and implement appropriate laws and programmes.

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Statement submitted by Amnesty International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Please recycle

Statement*

Women's right to choose their dress, free of coercion

1. Amnesty International believes that the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women provides a critical opportunity to give urgent consideration to the human rights implications of dress code requirements enforced or supported by Governments. In this statement, the organization highlights the examples of Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Chechnya, Russian Federation. Amnesty International has also raised concerns about measures by Governments in some European countries prohibiting specific forms of dress and about dress codes enforced by armed groups, informal "religious police" and other non-State actors.

Compulsory dress rules interfere with individuals' human rights

2. Under international human rights law, everyone has the rights to freedom of expression and freedom to manifest their religion or beliefs. The way people dress can be an important expression of their religious, cultural or personal identity or beliefs. As a general rule, the rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression entail that all people should be free to choose what and what not to wear.

3. Governments have an obligation to respect, protect and ensure every individual's right to express their beliefs or personal convictions or identity. They must create an environment in which every person can make that choice free of coercion.

4. Interpretations of religion, culture or tradition cannot justify imposing rules about dress on those who choose to dress differently. States should take measures to protect individuals from being coerced to dress in specific ways by family members, community or religious groups or leaders.

5. Under international human rights law, the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and to manifest one's religion or belief may only be subject to restrictions that meet a stringent three-part test: they must be prescribed by law; address a specific legitimate purpose permitted by international law; and be demonstrably necessary and proportionate for that purpose. The permissible legitimate purposes — ensuring respect for the rights of others or protecting certain public interests (national security or public safety, or public order, health or morals) — must be narrowly interpreted and must not be used to impose restrictions on dress that some — even a majority — find objectionable or offensive. Moreover, any restrictions must not be discriminatory or put in jeopardy the right itself or undermine other human rights.

Dress codes reflect and exacerbate discrimination

6. Norms associated with dress codes are often one way in which ideas and stereotypes about gender identity and roles are conveyed in law, policy and practice. They often impact much more heavily on women because States and other actors believe they are entitled to regulate women's dress as the symbolic embodiment of a

* Issued without formal editing.

community's values, whether or not these values are shared by the individuals on whom they are enforced.

7. Dress codes can be a manifestation of underlying discriminatory attitudes and reflect a desire to control women's sexuality, objectifying women and denying their personal autonomy.

8. Where women are subjected to violence or are stigmatized for not conforming to dress codes, they may be told that the blame lies with them. Blaming victims in this way is used as a pretext to reinforce the purported legitimacy of restrictions on dress.

9. States must not rely on stereotypes about religions, traditions or culture to restrict individuals' human rights. For instance, women from specific ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds should not be assumed to be committed to beliefs or rules that may be commonly associated with that background. Moreover, women who choose to identify in particular ways religiously or culturally should be able to make their own choices about what norms they follow rather than being forced to comply with rules that others impose on them.

Area and country examples

10. In Chechnya, Russian Federation, in November 2007, President Ramzan Kadyrov called for women to dress modestly, in line with tradition, and to wear a headscarf. Schoolgirls over the age of 10 and female students at higher educational establishments have been obliged to wear headscarves or face expulsion. Signs outside official buildings in Grozny state that only women wearing a headscarf may enter, and security guards reportedly enforce this.

11. Russian human rights defenders stated in September 2010 that they had seen groups of young men in uniforms or black clothes stop women whose dress was deemed not in line with Chechen tradition and lecture them on traditional Chechen values.

12. In Indonesia, the national commission on violence against women identified 21 regional regulations on dress codes that "directly discriminate against women" in intent or impact. Since 2010, a bylaw restricts dress for Muslim women in West Aceh district.

13. The Commission found that supposed dress codes infractions are wrongly cited to excuse crime, perpetuating "the impunity of the criminals because women victims are considered the most responsible party". Dress codes also discriminate against religious and ethnic minorities.

14. Punishments for infractions range from disciplinary sanctions for civil servants to social sanctions, including public shaming. Government officials may refuse to provide services to those considered not to conform. In Aceh, the Sharia police, and in some cases members of the public, conduct raids to ensure women comply; non-compliance is punishable by three months' imprisonment or a fine of two million rupiah ($220).

15. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, women and men appearing in public must adhere to a mandatory dress code that is enforced in law.

16. Women's dress must be loose fitting and cover their heads, necks, arms and legs all year round. While many women wear traditional forms of dress, others have also chosen to interpret this code in other ways, which has left them at risk of harassment from police or other security forces including the volunteer basij militia, particularly during summer crackdowns, which have increased since the election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005.

17. Violations of the dress code are criminalized under Article 638 of the Islamic Penal Code, which states that anyone who offends public decency will be sentenced to imprisonment from 10 days to two months, or to up to 74 lashes. A note to the article says that women who appear in public without Islamic covering will be sentenced to imprisonment from 10 days to two months or to a cash fine.

18. The dress code in Saudi Arabia applies to everyone, but is particularly restrictive on women, who are expected to dress in a way that covers their bodies with clothes that are not see-through or tight-fitting, as it is considered that showing parts of their body is a factor which can lead to adultery. There is no written dress code set out in law because Saudi Arabia does not have a criminal code; it is based on references to modesty in the Qur'an and the Sunnah (practices of the Prophet Mohammed).

19. A woman's guardian is expected to ensure that she follows the dress code. The religious police — the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice — ensure compliance with strict codes of Islamic conduct, including dress codes. They do this by verbally reprimanding women or their guardians, sometimes whipping them on the spot or arresting and detaining them, for perceived infractions such as not covering their faces or showing legs, arms, ankles and hair

20. In the Sudan the flogging of women for "indecent or immoral dress" under Article 152 of the 1991 Criminal Act came into the spotlight in 2009 through the case of journalist Lubna Hussein. More than a year afterwards, her appeal against the constitutionality of the law is pending before the Constitutional Court.

21. The public order regime, which applies to men and women, includes a public order police and public order courts that impose cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments for crimes of "indecent or immoral" dress or behaviour. The public order laws do not specify what is immoral or indecent dress, so the public order police have broad discretion to judge whether a person has acted in "an indecent manner, or a manner contrary to public morality" or "wears an indecent, or immoral dress, which causes annoyance to public feelings". The public order courts can impose corporal punishment of up to 40 lashes.

22. The public order regime has largely affected women, regardless of their religious beliefs or traditions as the public order police widely targets non-Muslim southerners in Khartoum, women from the Eritrean and Ethiopian diasporas and women from poor backgrounds, such as tea sellers and street vendors.

Recommendations

23. Amnesty International urges every State Member of the United Nations, in particular all members of the Commission on the Status of Women, to ensure that the following actions are taken:

(a) Repeal laws imposing requirements that individuals dress or do not dress in a certain way (unless the restrictions imposed are only such as are demonstrably necessary and proportionate for a legitimate purpose, as stipulated under international human rights law, and are not discriminatory);

(b) Take effective measures to protect women from violence, threats, or coercion by family members, community or religious groups or leaders in order to compel them to wear particular forms of dress;

(c) Actively promote women's equality and, in accordance with Article 5a of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, take measures to modify social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to eliminating prejudices and practices based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either sex or on stereotyped gender roles;

(d) Develop and implement strategies, policies and programmes aimed at the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

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Statement*

1. An acknowledgement is in order. It is, to say the least, regrettable, if not unacceptable, that although the States Members of the United Nations have ratified various international instruments to protect and defend human rights, girls seeking access to high-quality education and careers in the sciences, as well as full employment and decent work, continue to suffer abuse and discrimination.

2. The Cameroonian Government has not only ratified the human rights conventions and protocols, in particular, those on the promotion of women's rights, for example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, but has also put in place a set of implementing measures to facilitate access by youth to education and training. These include, among others, its poverty reduction strategy paper, which institutionalizes tuition-free education in all public elementary schools. As part of its official duties, the Cameroonian Government's Ministry for the Advancement of Women and the Family has created "women's centres", a kind of training centre for young women, throughout the national territory. These Government actions are bolstered by other private initiatives, such as the support which the Association des Femmes Scientifiques provides to young women interested in careers in the sciences.

3. All these efforts are practically for naught, however, and somewhat useless compared to what is needed and the social demand for education and the training of women on the ground. Should we give in to discouragement, or identify the origin of the evil? No one would say outright that the reason is simple: household poverty! That the economic crisis has thrown thousands of unemployed into the street! That sluggish sales of cash crops on the global market have plunged many planters into disarray! Its causes are multiple but it is nonetheless worth noting that a veritable campaign for responsible parents and education to change mentalities is truly necessary! Surveys and testimony taken on the ground have brought to light cases in which parents regarded their daughters as "plantains from the fields, ready to be sold as soon as they are ripe"! The births of the majority of these girls are not registered with their local vital statistics offices. What kind of better future or stable job can they possibly aspire to? The most controversial aspect is that it is common and natural, even permissible, for a parent to invest heavily in the education of a son and do the complete opposite for a daughter: some sort of training as a household worker is the most she can hope for.

4. Given this situation, innovative strategies are needed in order to successfully implement a gender approach, namely, girls must be provided with high-quality education and training and their access to full employment and decent work must be guaranteed. Clearly, this will entail the removal of certain obstacles at both the family level, by raising awareness and offering support to the most deprived families through the improvement of their living conditions, and at the level of the individual herself. As the completion of secondary education is very daunting for girls, granting them scholarships and various subsidies would give them an additional boost. The establishment of flexible arrangements for obtaining supplies and textbooks by distributing books at cooperatives while a course is in session and collecting them when classes are over are proposals that should be taken seriously, and which should be appealing to any good policymaker. It is therefore entirely

* Issued without formal editing.

natural to support the opening of State-subsidized canteens, since the daily diet of the majority of these girls is not balanced.

5. Lastly, with regard to professional training, the ministerial departments in charge of training young people will ensure that it is geared to the ultimate goal and environment of those young people. In other words, they will promote gender equality in their programmes and pave the way for better socio-economic integration of girls.

6. In concluding this chapter, we should not overlook the strides that have been made in the promotion of women's rights throughout the subregion, in Cameroon and in many other developing countries. However, our communities must recognize that only the liberation of girls from the burden of sexist stereotyping will mark the beginning of a free and prosperous world!

Elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against girls

1. In accordance with article 1 of the Convention, discrimination shall mean "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex [...] in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field". This Convention, moreover, enshrines equality between men, "men" being construed as "individual", consistent with the meaning established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

2. History demonstrates that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which Cameroon ratified in 1994 has transformed mentalities but one cannot reasonably speak of total elimination of discrimination against women in general and girls in particular. The various forms of discrimination against girls persist and one is more insidious than the next. All these things seriously compromise and endanger the full development of the future woman in this paradoxal Cameroon of ours, torn between its traditional heritage and its quest for modernity. Closer consideration of the question forces us to dwell on those phenomena which tarnish the image of the Cameroonian woman, and in a larger sense, the African woman: forced marriages, female circumcision, trafficking, domestic work, sexual tourism and prostitution.

3. Any well-informed observer will tell you — even if there are no reliable statistics on the matter — that to this day, girls are sometimes forced to marry older men merely to satisfy the greed of their parents, who make a fortune on the dowry. This happens time and time again in the northern part of the country. In the northwest, girls who remain under their parents' control risk becoming victims of forced marriage, trafficking or domestic work. The coastal areas are rife with girls forced into prostitution and sexual tourism by their own families for one reason and one reason only: to bring money home to feed the family.

4. From a cursory reading of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is evident that signatory States recognize children's inalienable rights to education, health, nutrition, a home, recreation and well-being. This Convention does not discriminate against any child, boy or girl, in the enjoyment of these rights. Conversely, in our families, the current practice is to sacrifice a girl's education for a boy's education.

5. The State, with a view to reversing the trend towards repeated violence against and abuse of children, promulgated Act No. 015 of December 2005 against trafficking and exploitation of child labour in the national territory. Despite social

mobilization and opinion polls by civil society organizations, the persistence of cultural and social obstacles aggravates the marginalization of girls in Cameroon. What makes this all the more deplorable, moreover, is that these child victims of rape, bodily injury from beatings and deprivation of their most basic rights, are without social protection. While the phenomenon of domestic work is certainly common, it is no less true that out of 100 child domestic workers, 98 are girls.

6. In any case, we cannot really understand this situation, which is an obstacle to development and to the full development of girls! Is it usage and customs? Is it poverty that drives parents to degrade women? Nonetheless, we remain convinced that one day, with the many initiatives that are under way in our country and the lobbying of national opinion, this evil that impedes the development of women and tarnishes their image will be no more than a bad memory.

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Statement submitted by Union de l'action féminine, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Please recycle

Statement*

1. Union de l'action féminine in Morocco, jointly with the Karama movement members across the Arab region, acknowledges the choice of the Commission on the Status of Women to focus on education and training girls and women for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work, in its fifty-fifth session taking place after the Beijing+15 review process and the new creation of the United Nations entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment called UN-Women.

2. We recognize that education and training for girls and women are fundamental to women's empowerment and to which all the States Members of the United Nations are committed. We therefore seek to achieve the goal set out below:

Raise levels of education for girls and women's access to employment in the Arab region

3. At the 10-year mark of the Millennium Development Goals, women constitute only 20 per cent of the workforce in the Middle East, compared to the global average of 40 per cent, according to the 2010 report on the Goals. In the wake of the economic crisis, the growing unemployment rate for men is limiting the women's pool of opportunities even further.

4. Women are often discriminated against in job opportunities, promotions and pay.

5. While increased access to employment has provided new economic and social opportunities for women, the jobs they occupy remain unregulated and unstable. Women workers are systematically denied their rights to equal work; permanent contracts and a safe and non-hazardous work environment.

6. Most of the time, women are subjected to sexual harassment, trafficking and economic exploitation, namely in the private sector.

7. One of the sustainable solutions is to expand educational and training opportunities for girls and for women, ensuring that the gender gap in enrolment is closed and that women have a wider range of occupations and alternatives for work and business enterprises. Expanding education and training will enable generations of women and girls to be more self-directed and successful in finding employment.

8. Arab States should undertake legal measures to ensure social justice, uphold equality of opportunities and treatment in respect of employment and occupation and guarantee paid maternity leave.

9. Although eight Arab countries have achieved gender parity in secondary schools and this has helped the overall gender gap in secondary schools in the Middle East to gain 10 points in 10 years, we note with concern that only 86 girls per 100 boys are enrolled in secondary school in our region. Ten of 22 Arab States have achieved gender parity in primary education, but overall the ratio is 92 girls per 100 boys at primary schools. These levels are trailing the greater progress made in most other regions of the globe over the past 10 years.

* Issued without formal editing.

10. Examining education levels in the Arab region, the 2010 report on the Goals acknowledges that the rapid growth of school-age populations is posing a challenge to accommodating all students, and this is affecting girls more than boys. Of the primary-age students in North Africa who are not enrolled in school, 66 per cent are girls. The global average is 53 per cent girls among non-enrolled youth.

11. Key countermeasures the Arab States should adopt include raising and enforcing the minimum age for marriage, reducing the work burden for girls in rural areas and investing more state resources in education.

12. We therefore call upon the States Members of the United Nations from the Arab States to take the measures described below.

Invest in and deliver equal access to education for girls and eliminate the gender gap

13. On the global map, only sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania have lower enrolment of girls than the Arab States in primary school. Nevertheless, there are 10 Arab States that have reached gender parity in primary education, and their high investment in education should be inciting for other States to invest in education and to promote strategies that can ensure that every girl has a seat, safe transportation and decent learning conditions.

Increase access to training and technology for women and civil society organizations

14. Access to training in computer technology is another strategy to build the capacity and services of the civil society organizations that provide adult education programmes, developing life skills and business capacities for women. In a recent survey of 67 adult education organizations in Egypt by the Women & Society Association, in partnership with Karama's education realm in Egypt, only 34 of the organizations surveyed had an e-mail address. If the trainers are not adept users of technology, their students are less likely to have the benefit of acquiring these skills. Women and girls of the Arab region need these skills to move forward in their education, their work, and to participate in and shape a society in which their rights, opportunity, prosperity and economic security are advancing.

Raise and enforce minimum age in marriage and ban labour by girls

15. Union de l'action féminine jointly with non-governmental organizations members of the Karama movement also urges Arab leaders to protect girls from early and forced marriages taking place in most Arab countries on religious and cultural basis.

16. While cases of contracted marriages of very young girls in Yemen and Saudi Arabia caught international attention through the media, such practices still take place even in countries where the age limit of marriage is 18.

17. Hence there is an urgent need to ban early marriages and to amend the law which authorizes judges to permit under-age girls to be married for arbitrary reasons or excuses, as is the case in most Arab countries. Girls should be protected from domestic work, and the private sector, namely multinational firms, should take a bigger role in ensuring that children are not exploited and that their right to education is guaranteed.

Concluding recommendations

18. We urge Arab States and all stakeholders to promote and protect women's and girls' rights to education, and to ban certain degrading practices such as early marriage, polygamy and guardianship (the wilaya), which is still in the hands of the husband only.

19. We urge the promotion and enforcement of the full rights of women related to work and employment. Our concern is to ensure that women have decent working conditions, fair treatment at work, equal job opportunities and work promotion.

20. Finally, we call upon the international community to promote strategies and policies to protect women's safety in peace and war times and to free women hostages in countries in or emerging from conflict and in all military camps, and to ensure that their right to freedom is respected.

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Statement submitted by Charitable Society for Social Welfare, Human Relief Foundation, International Islamic Charitable Organization, International Islamic Committee for Woman and Child, International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, International Islamic Relief Organization, International Muslim Women's Union and Muslim World League, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

1. We, on behalf of the Coalition of Islamic Organizations, fully support the efforts made to solve the problems of socially vulnerable groups but with full respect to the diversity of cultures and characteristics of the different peoples of the world. We support Governments in their reservations made during the signing of the international conventions on women and children, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing documents and other relevant documents, on all that was contrary to their religions, laws, values and cultures. We emphasize the importance of the Governments to adhere to their reservations, which is a right stated in the Charter of the United Nations, and to respect the will of their peoples.

2. We are gravely concerned about the recent escalation of prejudicial practices and laws to Muslim women in various countries as to their right to practise a way of life according to Islamic teachings, especially in terms of wearing headscarves. The rise of Islamophobia and stereotyping of and discrimination against Muslim women pervade public discourse, currently encapsulated in the non-issue of the burka or nikab in Europe, which has seen various countries criminalize wearers of face veils. In some countries, a ban on wearing the headscarf at university and at the workplace has persisted, meaning that thousands of women have been denied their right to education, which also affects their ability to participate in the work sector.

3. It is thus with the integration of gender perspectives in all legislations, policies and programmes that assumptions and theoretical stances arise to form a particular point of view about the diagnosis and analysis of women's issues. To assume the gender perspective as an interpretative framework that classifies humans according to their sexual orientation is misleading and a deficient tool to analyse the world. The Committee on the Status of Women should consider other interpretative frameworks to enrich the development of women worldwide. Restricting ourselves to a single school of thought is to restrict our ability to accurately diagnose the situation of women worldwide and prescribe solutions tailored and relevant to their respective context. Adopting a single framework is ignoring the body of diversity and is blind to the rich cultural differences, as well as the religious values that are strongly held by millions of women around the world.

4. Islam believes that women and men are equal but not identical and acknowledges the biological differences which determine the roles and responsibilities in the society. Therefore, there are certain responsibilities for men, such as protecting the family, fulfilling their needs and providing for them financially, which are not obligations of women. Similarly, women are responsible for motherhood and the care of the family.

5. Women may share the work outside the home but should not be forced by law to do so. Similarly, men may share the care of the household but should not be obligated by law to do so. Therefore, it is important that legislations, policies and programmes do not destabilize the family unit which is an important nucleus of society.

* Issued without formal editing.

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6. It is not acceptable that there is an intimidating atmosphere for Muslim women if they choose to lead their lives according to Islam. It is time Governments and more people took a stand against the vilification of Muslims to ensure that society does not further descend into the worst forms of racism and xenophobia.

7. We are also fully concerned about the increasing number of HIV/AIDS infection worldwide despite more intensified efforts to combat it. Although international statistics have shown that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS remains low in the Muslim world, with rates below 1 per cent, we will strive to prevent its spread. The Islamic solution to the prevention of HIV/AIDS is to go to the root of the problem. Therefore, Islam advocates a culture of chastity throughout the whole community, upholding of sexual fidelity at all costs during marriage, screening of blood donors and collaboration among social and cultural organizations to encourage people to uphold sexual morality and to create a drug-free society.

8. Last but not least, we call upon all parties concerned with the rights of women and children to work for the alleviation of the suffering of women and children who are under occupation, especially in Palestine and Iraq. These women and children are subjected to injustice and violation of their very basic right as human beings, the right to live.